



Committee on Foreign Affairs

CHAIRMAN ILEANA ROS-LEHTINEN



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Remarks

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Two weeks ago, we were proud to introduce the United Nations Transparency, Accountability, and Reform Act (H.R. 2829). The bill's title speaks for itself, that's what the bill attempts to do, but there's been a lot of misinformation about this bill, and we'd like to set the record straight about what this bill does and what it doesn't do.

This bill is about reforming the UN so that it can work again—not trying to bash the UN, or take the U.S. out of the UN. Why is our bill necessary? Well, last year, as our nation faced a struggling economy, skyrocketing deficits, and crushing debt, the Obama Administration contributed 7.7 billion dollars of U.S. taxpayer dollars to the UN—21 percent more than we contributed the year before.

What did U.S. taxpayers get in return for all of that money? We got a UN that is increasingly non-transparent, unaccountable, ineffective, biased against the U.S., Israel, and other free democracies.

But some have called our legislation “backwards.” And I will address that issue right now. I don't think it's backwards to demand transparency, accountability, and reform. But I do think the adjective “backwards” too often applies to what we're paying for at the UN. We pay for a backwards UN Human Rights Council, where human rights abusers like China, Cuba, and Saudi Arabia have hijacked that body and use it to demonize democratic states, like Israel, while real human rights abuses around the world are often ignored. They're always ignored.

I think it's backwards when the Council and the UN General Assembly has one permanent agenda item on its docket every year and that is to condemn Israel. You look at the UN Human Rights council agenda, one permanent agenda – condemn Israel – and another one for all the human rights abuses throughout the world. That's amazing.

It's backwards for Qaddafi's Libya to have been “elected” to that Council last year without a word of public opposition by the U.S.

It's also backwards when the Iranian regime, with a leader that has repeatedly called for Israel to be wiped off the map, and which stones women to death, sits on the UN Commission on the Status of Women.

We pay for the backwards Conference of Disarmament. Who chairs that conference? Cuba. Who just chaired it before Cuba? North Korea. A committee of disarmament of the U.N. A rogue state that

threatens U.S. security, our allies, global peace and security through its nuclear and missile programs, yet these are the countries that are on the committee of disarmament.

We pay for a backwards UN whose bureaucrats are about to receive a 3 percent pay raise, even as many ordinary Americans struggle to make ends meet.

Now, why has the UN fallen so low, and why do Americans pay so much in return for so little? Because of another backwards situation: at the UN, the countries that call the shots don't have to pay the bills. At the General Assembly, the vast majority of countries pay next to nothing in assessed contributions to the UN, but they can form a two-thirds majority to adopt budgets, while sticking the U.S. and other big donors with the tab. At the UN, the decisions are made by member states who don't bear the costs of the outcome.

And what does the U.S. do in response? Well, the Executive Branch goes along and pays every cent of our assessed contributions—including 22 percent of the UN general budget—plus billions more every year. Plus billions more each year. And because the UN bureaucracy and other member states know that we will pay in full no matter what, they have zero incentive to reform.

In fact, they add insult to injury, as the Secretary-General did two years ago when he came to Congress, as our guest, and called the U.S. the world's "biggest deadbeat." I was there.

But there is a simple, common sense alternative, and that's the principle that our bill is based: shifting funding for the UN to a voluntary basis, so that the American people, through their elected representatives, will get to choose how much of their tax dollars go to the UN and what the money is spent on.

This will change the current culture of entitlement at the UN. If you want to see the difference, look at the voluntary-funded UN bodies because some of those organizations are funded already on a voluntary basis – UNICEF, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, or the World Food Program (WFP). Those programs work. They are voluntarily funded. It can work, it has been implemented and the UN has not fallen apart because of it.

As Catherine Bertini, the former head of the World Food Program, once said:

“Voluntary funding creates an entirely different atmosphere at WFP than at the UN. At WFP, every staff member knows that we have to be as efficient, accountable, transparent, and results-oriented as is possible. If we are not, donor governments can take their funding elsewhere in a very competitive world among UN agencies, NGOs, and bilateral governments.”

I couldn't have said it better myself.

Now, to achieve this goal of shifting to a voluntary funding basis, as well as several other vital reforms throughout the UN system, our bill uses the dreaded “W” word: withholding. But what does withholding really mean? It means that when I contract with someone else to provide a service for me, and if they don't meet the basic, minimum standards in providing that service, then I withhold payment until I get

what I contracted for. What a concept. Because if, no matter what, I pay my bills “on time and in full,” as the Administration does with the UN, then I’ll never get what I’ve actually paid for and actually need.

For years – for decades really – the UN has been in breach of contract with the American people, failing to live up to its founding principles. Now, some say smart withholding sounds good, but does it actually work? Could withholding lead, as the Obama Administration claims, to a diminished U.S. leadership in the world?

Well, let’s look at some real examples of smart withholding. In the 1990s, Jesse Helms and Joe Biden – what a combo – worked together to condition repayment of U.S. dues to the UN on real, meaningful reforms that saved U.S. taxpayers money. If withholding was good enough for Helms-Biden—and President Clinton who signed the bill into law – then, it should be good enough for the Obama-Biden Administration today.

In the 1980s, a Democratic House and a Republican Senate enacted an amendment withholding some funding to the UN, until that institution implemented reforms to give big donors more of a say over approval of budgets. That worked until Congress stopped paying attention and dropped its strings-attached for U.S. funding, at which point the UN reverted to business as usual.

That’s why our bill is trying to fundamentally change the game by shifting UN budgets to a voluntary basis. It works.

One more example: in 1989, Yasser Arafat’s and his PLO tried to do the same thing that Abu Mazen’s is doing right now at the UN: seeking de facto recognition of a “Palestinian state” at the UN. The PLO seemed assured victory, and they said this is really going to happen this time; Israel seemed bound for international isolation. But then the George H.W. Bush Administration, which is highly regarded to this day for its success in multilateral diplomacy, made a bold pledge: the U.S. would withhold funding to any UN entity that granted membership, or upgraded status, to the PLO.

The PLO’s scheme was stopped dead in its tracks. Once again, smart withholding worked, and that’s why our bill uses the same funding conditions that worked two decades ago to stop Abu Mazen’s dangerous unilateral scheme that’s going on right now.

Now, we expect the UN’s apologists and lobbyists to strongly oppose our bill. They strongly oppose anything that would actually demand anything from the UN and we hope and expect better from the Administration at this critical time, when the UN is poised to severely undermine peace and security by supporting Abu Mazen’s dangerous scheme. We wish that the Administration would be standing with those who want to stop this scheme and fix the UN.

We hope that the Administration will reconsider and join our cause, the cause of millions of Americans who are tired of seeing their tax dollars too often go to waste at a UN that fails to live up to its founding principles.